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ABSTRACT

Academic freedom may be defined as the right to do that which a faculty member finds appropriate to scholarly inquiry and instruction, so long as it is not legally proscribed, does not constitute an explicit violation of institutional policy or a prior agreement to perform designated responsibilities and observe specified standards of conduct, and can be defended as having demonstrable educational significance. Academic freedom represents an important social and educational value. Despite the fact that it poses certain difficulties for those holding administrative positions, it is an aspect of educational life that is worthy of preservation. The price of academic freedom is contending with the threats to its existence (mainly but not exclusively from external sources) and the consequences of its exercise (especially in such areas as reasonableness of instructors' standards, grading practices, and relevance of course content and scholarship). In light of all that the presence of academic freedom has contributed to the good of education, that price is very small indeed. (RS)

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ACADEMIC FREEDOM AND THE MANAGEMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION: AN ADMINISTRATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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ACADEMIC FREEDOM AND THE MANAGEMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION: AN ADMINISTRATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction

When I was asked to participate in this panel, I have to confess that I agreed to do so as an individual who possesses no particular expertise in the subject. I must further confess that I can recall no serious incident involving questions of academic freedom during my twenty-one years in the profession that has affected me directly, either in my capacity as a faculty member or as an administrator. My brushes with the issue have been few and slight, albeit occasionally unpleasant from the nettle. From my perspective, then, the matter of what problems academic freedom poses for the management of higher education is largely an academic one. On the other hand, academic issues often have a way of becoming real and, therefore, are worthy of thoughtful consideration.

Nearly forty years have passed since Senator McCarthy and the constituency to which he appealed threatened the freedom to determine what constitutes appropriate instructional content, and means of presenting that content, most of us in education presently appear to enjoy. Nevertheless, the preservation of that freedom to choose remains a matter of concern. The question of preservation appears to be especially propitious at a period in history when certain political/religious groups have been busying

themselves with defining what, from their point of view, constitutes legitimate curricular content, when symbolic exercises in freedom of speech having educational intent are the object of public censure (and even Constitutional amendments), when a former Secretary of Education had recently traveled about the country offering himself as the model of an effective teacher and disdaining the efforts of literally hundreds of thousands of professional educators, when parents' groups have actively sought to remove books they find personally offensive from both classrooms and school libraries, when faculty often complain that other faculty are teaching the wrong content, or from the wrong perspective, when a state assembly passed legislation allegedly aimed at creating better balance in what is known about the creation of our world and the species, when college and university bookstores have flirted with removal of materials that the spokespersons for an alien culture consider to be a sacrilege, when special interest groups demand that attention to their particular concerns be reflected throughout the curriculum, when students are becoming increasingly vocal about what constitutes fair grading practices and what they expect to be covered in their courses, and when faculty and administrators actively seek to determine and regulate what every student should know.

How many of these types of occurrences entail questions of academic freedom, and how many of those that do present serious threats to it, I am not prepared to say. I mention them because they provide an impetus for reflecting on the subject, remind us that academic freedom has a certain fragility and vulnerability about it, and augur future possibilities about which one can ill-afford to be either cavalier or nonvigilant. For this reason, I am pleased to have the opportunity to share in a discussion of

the concept and to reflect on some of the difficulties academic freedom presents from at least one administrator's point of view. In so doing, I make no pretense about representing anyone else's perspective. My efforts in the remarks that follow have been directed toward identifying matters about which others may wish, or need, to think.

I consider myself a strong proponent of academic freedom, as I understand the concept. At the same time, I try to remind myself that its preservation, like that of other freedoms, depends heavily on how responsibly it is used. In considering the implications of the exercise of academic freedom as well as potential threats to it, I hope that in a small way I shall have contributed to the continuing dialogue that this important topic has stimulated.

What Is Academic Freedom?

One of the difficulties in discussing academic freedom is that those involved do not always have the same reference in mind. From some points of view, academic freedom suggests licence to behave in whatever way a teacher or scholar deems appropriate insofar as professional work is concerned. In the extreme, this view evokes the image of legions of educators behaving in a professionally irresponsible, if not almost decadent, manner. I regret saying that the view is not only held by our critics. More than one educator has been heard proclaiming, "Nobody is going to tell me how to run my class," "I'll teach what I damn well please," "The hell with students' opinions," or some such seeming affirmation of divine right.

Academic freedom as licence appears to be at the base of many people's wanting to place limits on it. Such a view, however, is naive. I am aware

of no category of freedom that comes close to being complete in the sense that the notion of licence conveys. All freedom, including that which we call "academic," is constrained. The question is whether or not the ways in which it is constrained have consequences that a sočiety can accept without seriously compromising the fundamental values to which it is ostensibly committed. In any event, the concept of academic freedom is not the equivalent of licence, nor do I suspect any serious student of the subject ever thought of it in such terms.

I am not aware of any generally agreed upon definition of academic freedom, but as with other concepts, the utility of definition is partially determined by the purposes it serves. For purposes of my exploration, then, I conceive of academic freedom as: **the right to do that which a faculty member finds appropriate to scholarly inquiry and instruction, so long as it is not legally proscribed, does not constitute an explicit violation of institutional policy or a prior agreement to perform designated responsibilities and observe specified standards of conduct, and can be defended as having demonstrable educational significance.**

Such a definition is admittedly relativistic and suggests that academic freedom will vary from institution to institution. In that sense, some of us have more academic freedom than others. The question of whether such variations are defensible is beyond the scope of my concerns here. In addition, it strikes me that questions of academic freedom arise less often in respect to the amount educators are given than in response to threatened reductions in the amount they understand themselves as having, or having been assured. I realize, of course, that there are times when members of the scholarly community will be concerned about the amount of academic

freedom they believe they possess, and when that occurs, there are definite implications for the administration of educational institutions. My inattention to this aspect of academic freedom does not imply that it is unimportant. As I have not seen a great deal of evidence suggesting that scholars feel their academic freedom is too limited, however, I have chosen to pursue the issues addressed in this paper within the context of whatever institutional arrangements scholars may have agreed to and am operating from the assumption that the amount of freedom relative to each institution is acceptable.

Administrative Problems Posed by Matters Related to Academic Freedom

An administrator who regards academic freedom as the right to exercise independent judgment about matters concerning research and scholarship within the limitations included in my definition has the potentially difficult task of balancing his or her obligations to assure and protect it with the potential and actual consequences of its exercise. The components in this balancing act suggest the two categories of problems with which an administrator may have to deal: those associated with the protection of academic freedom and the those stemming from its exercise. In the remainder of this paper, I have tried to identify some of the more specific manifestations of these problems with which an administrator may find him or herself confronted.

The Protection of Academic Freedom

Threats to academic freedom come from many quarters. Often the source is external. Cases involving academic freedom that attract attention beyond the institution, in fact, leave the impression that threats are usually, if not always, external. Some politician is upset by what he or she has heard an instructor has done in a class and wants action

taken, a religious group is unhappy with the science curriculum and demands that it be changed, or a student's parents are bringing suit on the grounds that their son or daughter did not receive the kind of education they believe they paid for. Other threats come from internal sources and may include students, faculty, and administrators. Whether the source of the threat is external or internal, some administrator will have to contend with the matter.

Why do I say that some administrator will have to contend with the matter? There are two reasons. First, those who feel that they have a legitimate dissatisfaction with a course, an instructor, a research project about which they have heard, or the like usually do not direct their concerns to the individuals responsible for whatever is upsetting them--at least, not in my experience. Students appear to fear retaliation, faculty members wish to remain anonymous so as not to impair working relationships and to maintain collegiality, administrators like to remind other administrators of their responsibilities (especially if the ones they are reminding are subordinate in the bureaucracy), and external groups want to deal directly with "the person in charge." Second, administration and, hence, administrators symbolize the authority structure of an educational institution. Those expressing dissatisfactions presume that power resides in the administrative role. Of course, to some extent it does, but not nearly on the scale most people believe.

Much of the dissatisfaction that comes an administrator's way takes the form of complaints and threatened, rather than real, actions. A student alleges that a course is impractical and is failing to contribute to his or her career preparation. A faculty member finds a colleague's course to be "watered down" and insists that students are learning nothing

of importance. "Something must be done. If you don't do it, I will take my case to someone higher." A parent feels that his son or daughter has been belittled by the student's instructor in class for professing his or her values and wants the instructor removed. Often discussion with the complaining party proves sufficient to resolve the concern. Either the administrator succeeds in convincing the party that the complaint is groundless or identifies alternative means for dealing with it that do not entail intruding on an instructor's freedom to determine appropriate content and methods of instruction.

I once was visited by an irate father concerning a requirement that all written work in a course be done by computer. In expressing his anger, the parent went through a veritable litany of how the department needed to be improved, including having "truth in advertising," finding instructors who are reasonable in their expectations, developing relevant content, and assuring fairness in grading practices. As it turned out, this individual was a member of the faculty of another department and professed great reluctance about bringing up "such distasteful matters." He found himself, however, "compelled to do so." This individual further purportedly respected "other faculty members' rights," but apparently not if their exercise made likely the possibility of his offspring's receiving a low grade.

As the discussion progressed, it became evident that the problem was that the student was unable to type. Until she enrolled in the course in question, the lack of this skill had not been problematic. If she failed or dropped the course, the student would have been unable to graduate at the end of the current semester. It was too late for her to enroll in another course; however, doing an independent study appeared to be a

realistic possibility. The suggestion met with the approval of both the parent and the student, and the issue was resolved. I heard no more about the matters the complainant originally claimed he wanted me to do something about.

The fact that dissatisfactions typically do not reach the point of action inimical to academic freedom does not free an administrator from taking them seriously. If left unaddressed, dissatisfactions may escalate and result in situations that the administrator could later regret. In the case I have just cited, implied directives about how the department, particularly the faculty, should manage its business represented a potential threat to academic freedom. At least during the period that the father was venting his anger, it was clear that he held little regard for the instructor's judgment or right to determine what to include in, or how best to teach, the course in question. Although a faculty member himself, this individual would have been quite willing to curtail, or have someone else curtail, a colleague's freedom of choice about matters germane to the courses he had been employed to teach.

On a separate occasion, I was visited by another irate parent/faculty member who also allegedly "regretted" having to register his complaint. This issue this time centered on a conflict between an instructor's right to specify what constitutes appropriate speech content and the student's freedom of speech and religion. The instructor in the case had told students that they could not use their speaking assignments to proselytize on behalf of a religion. The student, as a "born-again Christian," felt that he not only had the right, but the moral obligation, to win converts for Christ in any situation in which he saw the potential to do so. And what better situation could there be than a speech class in which students

are learning about processes of social influence? The father's argument was that I had the responsibility to protect his son's rights of free speech and to act on his religious convictions. My position was that there was an issue of Church and State and that I could not authorize the use of an instructional program for the propagation of any religious point of view.

After a very long discussion, the details of which I shall spare you, and a conversation with the student, we worked out an arrangement in which the student was transferred to another section of the course. The new instructor was informed that this particular student, when appropriate, wished to discuss religious issues, but that he would not use those occasions to witness, proselytize, or otherwise attempt to win converts.

I wish that I could report that the arrangement resolved the matter. Unfortunately, it did not. The father registered complaints with various officials and accused the department of supporting a policy in direct violation of freedom of religion and speech. The student, moreover, in his final speech made an appeal for classmates to become converts for Christ and took a poll after the speech to determine if he had offended anyone. The father called and inveighed that, since no student was offended, I should therefore lift the present policy and give students in the future the opportunity he firmly believed his son had been denied. The ensuing conversation is of no particular interest. Suffice it to say that I had no intention of altering my position and indicated a willingness to discuss the matter further only in an appropriately constituted judicial forum.

Although the disposition of each of the cases I have mentioned was quite different, each serves to illustrate the potential threat that dissatisfactions and complaints pose to academic freedom. People develop

set ways of thinking about permissible approaches to instruction and scholarship. Moreover, they sometimes appear to be more than willing to impose their views on others. In the first case, it was possible to work out a mutually satisfactory means for dealing with the complainant's concern. In the second case, the issue was also resolved, albeit not in a way that, from the complainant's point of view, was satisfactory. In neither case would it have been wise to have ignored the issue. Had I chosen to do so, I am not sure how the matters raised would eventually have been resolved. I have little doubt, however, that each of the parties would have pressed his case further without reference to the implications of their actions for the academic freedom of either their colleagues or themselves.

The protection of academic freedom has a certain price. In the second of the situations I described, it is clear to me that the complaining faculty member now has little use either for my department or for me personally. The refusal to acquiesce in the complainant's demands most likely gives that individual a basis for criticizing the department in other ways and discouraging students from any association with it. This brings me to the remaining matter I wish to address. The exercise of academic freedom, and efforts to protect it, can have consequences with which an administrator may also have to contend. Please understand that I am less concerned with the personal consequences for administrators than with the implications the exercise of academic freedom may have for educational and scholarly practice as well as for how well an institution may be able to perform its professed mission and to achieve its stated goals.

Consequences of the Exercise of Academic Freedom

Unfortunately, not all of the problems related to academic freedom administrators face stem from assaults on, and efforts to restrict, it. As an entitlement, its exercise can also create problems. Just as people tend to abuse other freedoms, so too can they perform acts in the name of academic freedom that are sometimes difficult to condone as defensible aspects of their professional roles. It would be pointless to attempt to catalogue all of the ways in which an administrator may be constrained by his or her observance of faculty members' academic freedom. Some examples, however, may help to emphasize the point. Three areas that come readily to mind have to do with the reasonableness of instructors' standards, grading practices, and the relevance of course content and scholarship.

Reasonableness of standards. Students frequently complain that the amount of work an instructor has asked of them for the credit awarded is excessive. It is easy to dismiss such protestations as the product of laziness, lack of ability, or manipulativeness. In fact, these are frequently the sources from which complaints spring. Reared in a culture in which the shopping mall is a major social institution, moreover, many students view education as a consumer-driven enterprise in which they should be able to find exactly what they are looking for. If the institution fails to serve them in precisely the way they deem appropriate, many believe that they have legitimate grounds for dissatisfaction and for demanding change.

Despite these observations, it is not always the case that a student's complaint about the amount of work expected or the level at which an instructor is teaching a course is unwarranted. New Ph.D.s, for instance, are sometimes prone to teach the body of theory to which they have been

exposed in their graduate programs with little or no modification in introductory, undergraduate courses. Some instructors convey an attitude of indifference to other responsibilities students may have and make pronouncements in class, such as, "I don't care how many other courses you are taking. This is the important one, and I expect you to devote your full attention to it." Still other instructors, although not quite so egocentric, nevertheless impose a quantity of work that is unrealistic for the amount of time that the typical student, or anyone else for that matter, has available for completing it. They presumably are committed to prevent idleness from bringing the devil to one of his favorite playgrounds.

In situations like those I have mentioned, an administrator might be torn between an appreciation of the student's concerns and the right of an instructor to determine what constitutes appropriate course requirements. Consultation with the instructor may help to alleviate the situation, but if it does not, then an administrator is left with the disturbing dilemma of permitting what he or she personally believes are unrealistic standards to remain in force. The question of how much it is reasonable to expect anyone to be able to accomplish admits of no clear answer, and this is what makes such situations particularly frustrating.

Grading practices. Closely related to the problems arising from the reasonableness of standards instructors may impose are the evaluative practices in which they occasionally engage. Just as academic freedom entails the notion that instructors have the right to determine what constitutes the body of knowledge that students can be expected to master, so too does it assume the right of the instructor to judge what represents mastery of that content. In making these judgments, some instructors are every bit as unreasonable in how they assess performance and knowledge acquisition as they are in setting course requirements. Some impose a

normal distribution requiring that a certain percentage of students fail a course regardless of how well the class as a whole has performed on the measures of achievement. Others will tell students that they "simply know what is A, B, C, D, and F quality work" and that they are under no obligation to explain how they arrive at their grade assignments. Yet others set ceilings and will declare that no student can expect to receive an A in the course. To these individuals, an A signifies superior achievement, and a student is a person who, by definition, is incapable of that quality of work. On the reverse side of the coin are instructors who refuse to discriminate among different levels of achievement. For whatever reasons--arrested adolescent rebelliousness, general contempt for authority, a philosophy that grades are nonconducive to learning, the desire to be liked or to avoid conflict--these educators hand out As in greater abundance than John D. Rockefeller distributed pennies to children.

Practices like these do little to make life easy for administrators. And in my experience, grades are by far the most frequent basis for student complaints about instructors. Even the excessively charitable ones become objects of criticism because harder working students perceive inequity when their less conscientious counterparts receive the same assessment for considerably less effort and, presumably, lower levels of achievement. An administrator can, and frequently does have to, insist that instructors explain grading practices and how individual grade assignments are made. However, if he or she ventures too far in suggesting the methods that instructors should employ, the administrator takes considerable risk of crossing the line between expression of concern and interference with academic freedom.

Relevance of course content and scholarship. The first two categories of problems, in time, often take care of themselves. Now commonplace in higher education, student evaluations give instructors feedback that can be useful in coming to the realization that their standards or grading practices might bear some re-examination. In addition, if changes do not occur, students eventually will stop enrolling in courses taught by instructors whose expectations and pedagogical practices continue to produce widespread dissatisfaction. Finally, from the students' own performance, an overly stringent grader and demanding instructor frequently begins to see that he or she is both asking and expecting too much. Similarly those with an exaggerated sense of charity, however well motivated, usually begin to learn that if one demands nothing, that's very likely what he or she will get. This type of evolution that instructors, at least the ones who want to be good teachers, undergo is perhaps the most encouraging aspect of non-interference for an administrator in matters involving standards and evaluative practices. One hopes that the evolution does not occur in too gradual a fashion; however, even if it does, it strikes me as an important consideration in faculty development to permit instructors to profit from their experiences and to make necessary and desirable adjustments in their professional conduct.

Perhaps more difficult for an administrator are issues and related problems stemming from the relevance of course content and scholarship, or the frequently alleged lack thereof. Please understand that I am not using the term relevance in the 1960s frame of reference, that is, as having to do with the social and political agendas of students and faculty. Nor am I thinking of relevance in the more materialistic sense of the 1980s as career-specific, "hands-on" preparation. In relation to academic freedom,

the concept has more to do with the extent to which the content of one's courses and the scholarship in which he or she may be engaged fall within the boundaries of one's discipline and the substantive issues with which that discipline is concerned.

Questions of relevance also emerge at a sub-disciplinary level as, say, in the case of one's teaching a course called Group Communication, in which he or she deals primarily with matters most others would regard as more appropriate to the area of organizational communication. The matter of relevance, however, more often than not arises in response to transdisciplinary ventures by teachers and scholars.

It is extremely difficult to remain exclusively within the confines of his or her discipline and achieve the educational and scholarly objectives a faculty member may have set. Among other things, disciplines have overlapping concerns, and their perimeters are fluid. In our willingness to avoid unduly restricting ourselves as teachers and scholars, however, we may become so preoccupied with the substance of, and developments in, other disciplines that our courses and scholarship appear to lack the imprimatur of our own. The lack of clear disciplinary connection can result in more than the raising of eyebrows among students, other faculty, and administrators who fail to see us doing that which they understand we are supposed to be doing. When such concerns arise, an administrator at the departmental level is likely to be the target and be expected to be able to account for perceived disciplinary itinerancy.

I cannot recall the number of times I have been present at a thesis of dissertation defense when the external member of the examining committee has made a comment to the supervisor such as, "I understand the study, but I don't understand what it has to do with communication." You may have

had similar experiences. On other occasions, observations such as that above are specifically directed to me in the role of department head. For instance, I have occasionally been asked by members of college or university-level promotion and tenure committees to explain how a colleague's research program advances knowledge in the field of Speech Communication. In addition, students often complain that their speech courses have nothing to do with speech. They offer such reports, as, "We read all these philosophers," "The course covered the same material as my course in psych," and "We did not give one speech in my public speaking course. We just talked a lot about politicians." It would help if more members of a faculty took the time to comment on how the material they cover in classes relates to communication, or whatever the field of interest happens to be, but most educators of my acquaintance see themselves as having no such obligation. Questions of relevance may evoke the all-purpose reaction to criticism, "That is their problem, not mine," or some other such display of indifference. As a result, an administrator is frequently placed in the position of having to establish connectedness.

Insofar as courses are concerned, an administrator can remind faculty members of published descriptions and even insist that the content of their courses reflect those descriptions without violating academic freedom. Course descriptions, however, tend to be deliberately general so as to permit flexibility. Consequently, an administrator may have no firm basis on which to effect changes in course content that appears to be of questionable relevance. In instances of blatant disregard for connection to the discipline, an administrator may have legitimate grounds for telling an instructor that the content of one or more of the courses he or she is

teaching is unacceptable. In general, however, one must be extremely cautious about this sort of intrusiveness.

The problem of relevance may be even more difficult when it comes to scholarship because the criteria for assessing it are not ones anywhere close to having universal agreement. Is a biography of Abraham Lincoln, for instance, relevant to the interests of our discipline? How does a survey of managerial styles in complex organizations contribute to a better understanding of communication? In what ways do we know more about communication from an investigation of the personality factors that predict leadership emergence in small groups? What, if anything, do Marxist notions of historical determinism have to do with human interaction? Some would find research of the sort these questions suggest peripheral at best. Others might find it to lie at the very core of the discipline.

Questions such as those above, on the surface, would not appear to invite responses by external critics indicating that they see their having much relevance to communication. Nevertheless, the types of scholarly inquiry to which they refer are not ones I would feel obliged to discourage colleagues from undertaking. Under no circumstances would I be inclined to tell a colleague that the project indicated by each question is of such questionable relevance that he or she is not free to proceed. Even though I might think the project too far removed from the legitimate concerns of the discipline, from my perspective, it is far better to tolerate scholarship of doubtful relevance than to impose potentially damaging limits on exploration the producers of that scholarship see as important to advancing knowledge. In the final analysis, moreover, quality rather than perceived relevance, will be the criterion by which one's scholarly achievements are judged.

Concluding Thoughts

Academic freedom represents an important social and educational value. Despite the fact that it poses certain difficulties for those holding administrative positions, it is an aspect of educational life that is worthy of preservation. As I mentioned at the outset, I personally have been inconvenienced by matters relating to academic freedom only infrequently, but even if my experience had been to the contrary, my argument would remain the same. The price of academic freedom is contending with threats to its existence and the consequences of its exercise. In light of all that the presence of academic freedom has contributed to the good of education in our society, that price seems very small indeed.